

# THE DREISER NEWSLETTER

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## DREISER IN PAPERBACK: Riches and Rags

by

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"We are reading Dreiser again," Ellen Moers wrote ten years ago. "Without benefit of editorial fanfare or critical hoopla, a revival is upon us, solidified by that blessed invention of the fifties, the quality paperback book"; and she went on to observe that "There are seventeen Dreiser volumes now in paper, including seven different imprints of *Sister Carrie*."<sup>1</sup> The Dreiser revival is ten years old, and, according to *Paperbound Books in Print* for May 1972, there are now sixteen Dreiser volumes in paper, of which eleven are imprints of *Sister Carrie*. None of these sixteen volumes was new that year, as is evident from checking the May Dreiser list against the list in the November 1971 catalogue; and a comparison in turn of the November 1971 catalogue with that of the previous year shows that just two new publications appeared in 1971 -- both of them editions of *Sister Carrie*. Furthermore, on inquiry to the publishers, one discovers that of these sixteen volumes in print in 1971 and 1972, two are out of stock, one of them the only paperback edition of *Jennie Gerhardt*.<sup>2</sup> Surely it can be said that we are making brave progress backwards.

Interest in Dreiser has not ebbed in these ten years, nor has it merely maintained its level. It has rather grown; and thus one is confronted with the paradox that Dreiser is attracting more readers at a time when the number of his texts in paperback has declined, and when the variety of those texts, to judge from the greater preponderance of *Sister Carrie* imprints, has dwindled. And yet the paradox is a clear testament to Dreiser's

appeal, to his power to attract an increasing readership among students, teachers, and the general public despite this shrinkage of his available texts. This growing interest becomes an even stronger testament to Dreiser when one considers the unappealing format of many of the paperbacks in which his readers encounter him and to which many must resort if they are to buy and read his books at all -- but more of that subject in a moment.

As I have indicated, of the sixteen Dreiser volumes in paperback in 1972, eleven, or two thirds of the total, were editions of *Sister Carrie*. The reader's wealth of choice in that book becomes a miser's hoard for the remaining five, each the only available paper edition of *The "Genius"*, *The Financier*, *The Titan*,<sup>3</sup> and *An American Tragedy*, and the out-of-stock *Jennie Gerhardt*. One looks in vain for editions of *The Stoic* and *The Bulwark* (quite in vain, for neither are in hardback either), for a paper edition, now too, of *Jennie Gerhardt*, and for a reasonably priced edition of the short stories (the 1971 *Books in Print* lists only a \$17 reprint of the 1925 edition of *Free, & Other Stories*). For Dreiser's five works of autobiography and travel it is useless to inquire -- none are in print in hardback or paperback; and with the exception of *Twelve Men* (available in hardback) the same is true of his six volumes of sketches and essays.

Unfortunate as it is that so much of Dreiser is unavailable, however, I want to concentrate here on the inferior quality of many of his paperback texts that are available, for one good edition honors the author and pleases his readers more than a thousand poor. And in speaking of this lack of quality I would emphasize some mundane but necessary concerns -- not the editorial embellishments of the books, but their physical aspects.

Of the sixteen Dreiser paperbacks in print last year, I was able to examine twelve (all except the *Jennie Gerhardt* and three editions of *Sister Carrie*). The wealth of choice for *Sister Carrie* also affords the reader some decently printed texts. Four of the eight editions I saw of this novel are particularly commendable. The Riverside Edition (1959, ed. Claude Simpson), the Bobbs-Merrill edition (1970, ed. Jack Salzman), and the Norton Critical Edition (1970, ed. Donald Pizer) each identifies its text as a reprint of the text of the first edition (Doubleday, Page & Co., 1900); and the Merrill Standard Edition (1969, intro. Louis Auchincloss) is a facsimile of the first impression, first edition. Moreover, these four editions (and also the Amsco Literature Series edition, n. d., no editor) are all quality paperbacks, printed on sufficiently large pages in a readable type size that eases the eyes and with adequate or even (in the Merrill Standard Edition) capacious margins on which one can make

notes. The Bobbs-Merrill edition is unique among all the paperback reprints of Dreiser in having sewn gatherings instead of the usual cut edges held together by glue.

As for the Dreiser paperbacks other than those of *Sister Carrie* (which means the only paperback of *An American Tragedy*, and the only current editions of *The "Genius"*, *The Financier*, and *The Titan*), they are available -- and for that one must at some point be grateful to the publisher -- but beyond this observation there is little to be said for them and much against. The dismal fact is that these editions are simply inadequate for civilized reading, study, and perusal. Their type is minute and their margins exquisitely thin. Their pages are so niggardly that, inconspicuous though the printing is, it nearly covers them; and the text is so crowded in on the bound edges of the pages that the reader, in order to read there, must either subject himself to discomfiting contortions or virtually break the already enfeebled spine of the book. It hardly needs saying that the paper in these editions is cheap, flimsy, and more off-white than white. For the reader these editions are uninviting and even distasteful, so tacky and repellent that the only possible inducement for buying them is Dreiser's writing itself. And for the student it is hardly possible to study Dreiser intelligently when one reads him in these texts; it is easy to believe, in fact, that they discourage studying -- as opposed to reading -- him at all.

Max Beerbohm is not a writer usually conjoined with Dreiser, but he also encountered inexpensive editions of good authors and on the subject he is as usual a fount of good sense. "It would seem," he wrote in 1910,

that I am one of those travellers for whom the railway bookstall does not cater. Whenever I start on a journey, I find that my choice lies between well-printed books which I have no wish to read, and well-written books which I could not read without permanent injury to my eyesight. The keeper of the bookstall, seeing me gaze vaguely among his shelfs, suggests that I should take *Fen Country Farmy*, or else *The Track of Blood* and have done with it. Not wishing to hurt his feelings, I refuse these works on the plea that I have read them. Whereon he, devining despite me that I am a superior person, says "Here is a nice little handy edition of More's *Utopia*" or "Carlyle's *French Revolution*" and again I make some excuse. What pleasure could I get from trying to cope with a masterpiece printed in diminutive grey-ish type

on a semi-transparent little grey-ish page? I believe the bookstall of nothing but a newspaper or two.<sup>4</sup>

In Beerbohm's account of his plight today's reader hears the voice of a companion spirit; his experience sometimes matches and even overreaches Beerbohm's dilemma. For the dilemma no longer touches the traveller alone, but is encountered by the general reader; it is no longer confined to the railway bookstall, but is found in the quality bookstore. It is true that many classic, great, and less-than-great authors now appear in paperbacks that are substantial, spacious, and attractive. One does not have to read Cooper, Melville, Twain, Norris, James, Hemingway, and Fitzgerald in the paltry, tacky editions that he must perforce read most of Dreiser in. It is therefore all the more inexplicable and shameful, at a time when publishers have found it possible, and profitable, to market quality paperbacks of these and who knows how many other authors, that many of Dreiser's works are not even in print, and that most of his major works in paper can be obtained only in books little larger than matchboxes and nearly as ephemeral. The publishers' past neglect, however, is their present opportunity. The Dreiser revival waxes strong; only *Sister Carrie* is in quality paperback; and quality paperbacks of his other novels are clearly needed and would find an eager market. The publisher who brings them out would simply be responding to enlightened self-interest, and would thereby serve the interests of all.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Finesse of Dreiser," *The American Scholar*, 33 (Winter 1963), rpt. in John Lydenberg, ed., *Dreiser: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Twentieth Century Views (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 153.

<sup>2</sup> A late correction. I find now that *Jennie Gerhardt* is not only out-of-stock, but out-of-print, as it is omitted from the November 1972 *Paperbound Books in Print*. This dropping of *Jennie Gerhardt* is the only change in the Dreiser paperback list from that of a year earlier; nothing has been added.

<sup>3</sup> Even worse, these three are available only in paperback; there is no current hardback edition of any of them.

<sup>4</sup> "How Shall I Word It?" in *Max Beerbohm: Selected Prose*, ed. Lord David Cecil (Boston: Little [1970]), p. 300.

# A DREISER CHECKLIST, 1971

## Part Two

Compiled and Annotated

by

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This part of the 1971 checklist lists publications that include Dreiser as part of the examination of a broader topic and new editions and reprints of earlier Dreiser studies. Also listed are a number of items omitted from previous checklists. I have annotated all publications that I have been able to examine.

*The American Novel and the Nineteen Twenties.* Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 13. London: Edward Arnold, 1971.

In an essay on the social implications of the work of Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway, Henry Dan Piper points out the debts of these writers to Dreiser and Anderson. Brian Lee and Eric Mottram also touch on Dreiser in their essays in this collection.

"Apostle of Naturalism," *MD* (Medical Newsmagazine), 15 (July 1971), 111-17.

This article gives a summary account of Dreiser's life and work.

Berry, Thomas Elliott. *The Newspaper in the American Novel, 1900-1969.* Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1970.

In the course of his examination of the treatment of the twentieth century newspaper and newspaperman in American novels, Berry discusses Dreiser's portrayal of newspapers in *An American Tragedy* and his two autobiographical works and comments on the character of Witla in *The "Genius"*.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *An Introduction to American Literature.* Ed. and trans. L. Clark Keating and Robert O. Evans. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1971.

In his brief comments on Dreiser, Borges notes some major differences between Stephen Crane and Dreiser as novelists and asserts that "despite the harshness and violence of his doctrines [Dreiser] was a romantic at heart."

Chuntonova, N. "Ta, Kotoraya Ne Boyalas' Zhizni [She, Who Was Not Afraid of Life]," *Molodoi Kommunist* (Moscow), No. 4 (1970), pp. 120-25.

Churchill, Allen. *The Literary Decade*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

Churchill discusses Dreiser's work before the twenties in one chapter, Dreiser's relationship with Horace Liveright and the success of *An American Tragedy* in another, and Dreiser's visit to Russia and subsequent quarrels with Sinclair Lewis in a third. Other references to Dreiser *passim*.

Dahlberg, Edward. "Dahlberg on Dreiser, Anderson and Dahlberg," *New York Times Book Review*, 31 Jan. 1971, pp. 2, 30-31.

After noting that an author needs an elder man of letters to guide him and that Dreiser and Anderson were his teachers, Dahlberg recounts what he learned from Dreiser during his meetings with the novelist.

De Jovine, F. Anthony. *The Young Hero in American Fiction*. New York: Appleton, 1971.

De Jovine comments on elements of *An American Tragedy* and 16 other novels with a young hero to illustrate his suggestions for teaching literature in high school and in introductory courses in college.

*Dramatic Highlights from Free by Theodore Dreiser* (Audio Tape). Hollywood, Cal.: Center for Cassette Studies. 25 min.

Dreiser, Theodore. *Fine Furniture*. Folcroft, Pa.: Folcroft, 1970.

This is a reprint of the 1930 edition.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Racconti*. Ed. Rolando Anzilotti. Trans. Diana Bonaccossa. Bari, Italy: De Donato, 1971.

This is an Italian translation of the text of the 1956 World Publishing Co. edition of *The Best Short Stories of Theodore Dreiser*, edited by James Farrell. Anzilotti has added an introduction, a chronology of Dreiser's life and a bibliography of works by and about Dreiser in English and Italian.

Earnest, Ernest. *The Single Vision: The Alienation of American Intellectuals*. New York: New York Univ. Press, 1970.

As part of his study of the limitations of the second American literary renaissance, Earnest argues that "Mencken and the younger critics may have overvalued Dreiser as a pioneer." Other references to Dreiser *passim*.

Eichelberger, Clayton L. *A Guide to Critical Reviews of United States Fiction, 1870-1910*. Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1971.

Eichelberger lists reviews of *Sister Carrie* that appeared in the *Athenaeum* (London), the *Bookman* (NY), the *North American Review* and the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*.

Gerstenberger, Donna, and George Hendrick. *The American Novel. A Checklist of Twentieth Century Criticism on Novels Written since 1789. Volume II: Criticism Written 1960-1968*. Chicago: Swallow, 1970.

Under Dreiser, Gerstenberger and Hendrick list 55 studies of individual works, 29 general studies and 5 bibliographies.

Gingrich, Arnold. *Nothing But People*. New York: Crown, 1971.

Gingrich touches on his association with and impressions of Dreiser in this personal history of the early days of *Esquire*.

Grebstein, Sheldon. *Sister Carrie* (Audio Tape). Twentieth Century American Novel Series. Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards.

Hakutani, Yoshinobu. "Theodore Dreiser's Editorial and Free-Lance Writing," *Library Chronicle*, 37 (Winter 1971), 70-85.

Focusing on Dreiser's magazine articles between 1895 and 1899, Hakutani demonstrates that "we can . . . discover in these writings a clearer definition of his philosophy of life [than in his earlier newspaper articles], a vacillation between his pessimistic and optimistic attitudes towards man's life, and finally a glimpse of his fundamental theory of fiction."

Handy, William J. "Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*," in *Modern Fiction: A Formalist Approach*. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1971. Pp. 62-74.

This essay is a reprint of the second section of "A Re-Examination of Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*," which Handy first

published in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 1 (Autumn 1959), 380-93.

Havlice, Patricia Pate. *Index to American Author Bibliographies*. Metuchen, N. J.: Scarecrow Press, 1971.

Havlice lists two bibliographies of Dreiser that appeared in periodicals.

Jones, Lawrence W. "Canadian Graduate Studies in American Literature: A Bibliography of Theses and Dissertations, 1921-1968," *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 1 (Fall 1970), 116-29.

Jones lists three master's theses on Dreiser.

Kazin, Alfred. "Theodore Dreiser: His Education and Ours," in *Criticism: Some Major American Writers*. Ed. Lewis Leary. New York: Holt, 1971. Pp. 261-67.

This is a reprint of Kazin's discussion of Dreiser in *On Native Grounds* (New York, 1942).

Keller, Dean H. "Dreiser's *Concerning Dives and Lazarus*," *Serif*, 8 (June 1971), 31-32.

In this bibliographical note, Keller describes the broadside publication of Dreiser's April, 1940, article in *Soviet Russia Today*.

Kraft, Hy. *On My Way to the Theater*. New York: Macmillan, 1971.

In a chapter entitled "Inside Dreiser," Kraft recalls his "special synergistic relationship" with the author.

Labrie, Rodrigue E. "American Naturalism: An Appraisal," *Markham Review*, 2 (Feb. 1971), 88-90.

Labrie discusses Dreiser's work as the third phase of the development of naturalism in America and claims that the movement "reached its peak with *An American Tragedy*."

Lehan, Richard. *An American Tragedy* (Audio Tape). Twentieth Century American Novel Series. Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards.

Marshall, Donald Ray. "The Green Promise: Greenness as a Dominant Symbol in the Quest of Eden in American Fiction," *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 32 (1971), 925A (U. Conn.).

Dreiser is included in Marshall's study of greenness as a symbol in American fiction.

Moers, Ellen. "When New York Made It," *New York Times Book Review*, 16 May 1971, pp. 31-32.

Moers commemorates the births of Dreiser, Stephen Crane, John Sloan and James Weldon Johnson in 1871 by discussing the contributions of these men to New York City's art and literature.

"Minority Report: Third Series," *Menckeniana*, No. 38 (Summer 1971), 1-2.

Among these selections from previously unpublished material by H. L. Mencken is a comment on the character of Dreiser.

Moore, Harry T. "Dreiser and the Inappropriate Biographer," in *Age of the Modern and Other Literary Essays*. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1971. Pp. 73-76.

This is a reprint of a review of W. A. Swanberg's *Dreiser*, which Moore wrote for *Books Today* (25 April 1965).

Munson, Gorham Bert. *Destinations; A Canvass of American Literature since 1900*. New York: AMS Press, 1970.

This is a reprint of the 1928 edition of Munson's work, which has a chapter entitled "The Motivation of Theodore Dreiser."

Nilon, Charles H. *Bibliography of Bibliographies in American Literature*. New York: Bowker, 1970.

Nilon lists 13 bibliographies of Dreiser.

Parker, Dorothy. "Words, Words, Words," in *Constant Reader*. New York: Viking, 1970. Pp. 138-43.

This is a reprint of Parker's review of *Dawn*.

Perkins, George, ed. *The Theory of the American Novel*. New York: Holt, 1970.

Perkins includes Dreiser's comments on unpublished realism in *A Book About Myself* in this collection of critical statements by American novelists on the novel. References to Dreiser appear in a number of the other selections.

Pirinska, Pavlina. "Teodor Drayzur i Amerika [Theodore Dreiser and America]," *Literaturna Misul*, 15, No. 4 (1971), 133-45.

An English abstract of this article appears in *Abstracts of English Studies*, 16 (Oct. 1972), no. 539.

"Pis'ma Amerikanskikh Pisatelei (U. Sinklera, Dzh. Dos Passosa, T. Draizera, N. Makleoda i U. Frenka [1931-1934 gg. Publikatsiya A. N. Nikolyukina]) [Letters of American Writers: U. Sinclair, J. Dos Passos, T. Dreiser, N. Macleod, W. Frank (1931-1934. A Publication of A. N. Nikolyukin)]," *Literaturnoe Nasledstvo*, 81 (1969), 467-86.

Pomeroy, Charles Williams. "Soviet Russian Criticism 1960-1969 of Seven Twentieth Century American Novelists," *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 32 (1971), 449A (So. Cal.).

Focusing part of his study on Russian criticism of *An American Tragedy*, Pomeroy states that most critics "interpret Clyde Griffiths . . . as a typical American psychologically mutilated and driven to crime by his country's degenerate environment." He notes, however, that "one critic . . . strikes out independently: A. P. Shpakova discusses the ironic relations between narrator and hero in Dreiser's novel."

Postnov, Yu. S. "Masterstvo T. Draizera v Romane *Sestra Kerri* [Dreiser's Mastery in the novel *Sister Carrie*]," *Voprosy Yazyka i Literatury* (Novosibirskii Universitet), 3, No. 1 (1969), 75-85.

Sears, Donald A., and Margaret Bourland. "Journalism Makes the Style," *Journalism Quarterly*, 47 (Autumn 1970), 504-09.

In this study Sears and Bourland compare the style of four American writers with a journalistic background (S. Crane, Dreiser, Hemingway, and Hersey) to the style of four literary figures without journalistic experience (James, Wharton, Wolfe and Capote). They find that "the style of the four with journalistic background displays a tendency toward the elimination of semantic noise, characterized by compressed syntax, clear and active word choice, and concrete objective detail."

Spiller, Robert. *The Second Renaissance* (Audio Tape). Great American Writers, No. 4, Deland, Fla.: Everett/Edwards, 1970. 35 min.

Dreiser is one of the writers discussed at length in Spiller's lecture. Dreiser's naturalism, asserts Spiller, provided "the main outlines of its emotional and intellectual orientation for the new American literature in much the same way that Emerson's assertion of transcendentalism . . . had defined the world of ideas and feelings in which the most sensitive of his fellows were acutely living."

Stenerson, Douglas C. *H. L. Mencken: Iconoclast from Baltimore.* Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971.

In his study of Mencken through the mid-1920's, Stenerson discusses various aspects of the Dreiser-Mencken relationship, including Mencken's admiration for Dreiser, his defense of Dreiser's naturalism against the critical attack of Stuart Sherman and his fight against the censorship of *The "Genius"*.

Weber, Diane Judith Downs. "The Autobiography of Childhood in America," *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 32 (1971), 936A (Geo. Washington).

Weber includes Dreiser in her study of the development and characteristics of American autobiographies of childhood.

*The Writer and the City* (16 mm. color film). University-at-Large Programs, 1970. 28 min.

In this film Alfred Kazin comments on Dreiser and reads from *Sister Carrie* while tracing the relationship of American writers to the city from the nineteenth century to the present. "No one," states Kazin, "rendered the physical sense of the city with so much feeling as Theodore Dreiser."

Za., Ya. "Tam, gde Khranyatsya Rukopisi Teodora Draizera [The Place where the Manuscripts of Theodore Dreiser Are Kept]," *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (Moscow), 11 Feb. 1970, p. 13.

#### ADDENDUM

Grebstein, Sheldon Norman. "Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945)," in *The Politics of Twentieth Century Novelists*. Ed. George A. Panichas. New York: Hawthorn Books, 1971. Pp. 231-50.

In this essay Grebstein discusses Dreiser's "portrayal of political events in his novels as conspiracies . . .," his "depiction of social opinion . . . as an exercise of political power," and his "ambivalent treatment of the relative influence of heredity and environment in human nature . . . ."

## DREISER'S EMOTIONAL POWER

Professor Jack Salzman's talk entitled "Dreiser's Position in the History of American Literature," delivered at the recent Centennial observance in Terre Haute, proved to be one of the more provocative of the papers presented. Equally intriguing was the discussion which followed the address in which Professor Salzman and several of his listeners lamented the fact that critics have failed to identify the source of Dreiser's literary power. One member of the audience held that the time had come to demonstrate this power through an analysis of the words on the page rather than repeat the attempts to establish it with the aid of the author's biography, in other words to argue for the greatness of Dreiser the novelist instead of Dreiser the man.

Although the whole question of the source of a writer's power ignores the literary critical truism that "power" and "greatness" are in the eye of the beholder, I want to try to respond to Professor Salzman's challenge by defining briefly Dreiser's peculiar force for this beholder, and hopefully for others. I am convinced, however, that the analysis of "the words on the page" is not a productive procedure in Dreiser's case, except, paradoxically, for a few key words spoken by the author in *Sister Carrie* to describe his heroine's unarticulated but profound emotions:

People in general attach too much importance to words. They are under the illusion that talking effects great results. As a matter of fact, words are, as a rule, the shallowest portion of all the argument. They but dimly represent the great surging feelings and desires which lie behind. When the distraction of the tongue is removed, the heart listens. (*Sister Carrie*, 1900, p. 130)

Nearly all of Dreiser's characters exhibit these "great surging feelings and desires" with no clear perception of their end or their meaning. They restlessly seek contentment in fame, fortune, sex, social position, art and nature, but they are denied fulfillment because the objects of their worldly desires are not commensurate with the power of their longing. Carrie wondering in her rocking chair, Jennie seeking meaning through service, Cowperwood in quest of a financial empire, Witla pursuing "the impossible she," Clyde dreaming of his "place in the sun," all display a desire which the attainment of the apparent goal cannot assuage.

The reader perceives beneath even their simplest ambitions an urgent need to embrace the universe, to realize ideal beauty. Dreiser's much maligned style, his labored intrusions and inchoate dialogue convey a sense of groping unrest which suggests modern man's essential dilemma, his yearning for the ultimate fulfillment which only unweakened religious faith had the power to address. Dreiser was among the first American novelists to perceive the distance between the modern American's reach and his grasp, whether he were a bellhop or a tycoon. We easily identify with his characters, for their search for substance is ours.

Though Dreiser apprehends modern man's loss of moorings, he does not analyze it in any consistent or even coherent way, at least not until *The Bulwark*. His power resides, rather, in his sure grasp of the way it feels to be a modern American. Few would hold that his philosophy exhibits logical consistency but the importance of his subjects and his intense feeling are not to be doubted. His novels reveal a power analogous to that of Mahler's symphonies, the felt power stemming not from originality of theme or virtuosity in development but from the grand sweep of the passion which soars beyond the finite universe.

Academic criticism with its predilection for close analysis characteristically focusses on "the shallowest portion of all the argument" in Dreiser's novels, hence the long tradition of attacks on his style and defenses of his "naturalism." But Dreiser's extraordinary empathy for modern man's seemingly hopeless pursuit of the ultimate defies the word by word analysis recommended in the discussion following Professor Salzman's talk.

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# George Sterling's Letters to Theodore Dreiser: 1920-1926

by

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For over a generation, George Sterling occupied a prominent position in California literary circles. From the late 1890's when he wrote poetry under the tutelage of Ambrose Bierce, until his suicide at the Bohemian Club in 1926, where he was to have acted as host to his friend H. L. Mencken, Sterling knew, and was respected by, such diverse figures as Jack London, Edwin Markham, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair Lewis, and Whit Burnett. Mencken published Sterling's poetry frequently in his *Smart Set*, and Theodore Dreiser declared that Sterling was "the ranking American poet, greater than any we have thus far produced."<sup>1</sup>

It was Sterling who initiated both Mencken and Dreiser into San Francisco Bohemia. In Dreiser's case, this experience came at a crucial time in his career, when he had left the East because of his difficulties with censors and critics, and had moved to Los Angeles, where he was working on *An American Tragedy*. From 1920, when Sterling invited him to visit San Francisco, until Sterling's suicide in 1926, Dreiser found himself reading Sterling's work, discussing literary problems with him, and, occasionally, reading the works of young writers whom Sterling wished him to help. Though the influence of Sterling and San Francisco on Dreiser was not profound, it was genuine. The following selections from Sterling's letters reveal that Dreiser found in him good companionship, and poetic tastes and philosophic attitudes similar to his own.

All of the following letters were written while Sterling lived at the Bohemian Club in San Francisco.

May 16, 1923

Good old elephant:

As soon as I read Beach's letter,<sup>2</sup> I knew what your reaction to it would be. The fact is that the termites of The Author's League are not on a greatly higher level, intellectually, than the movie-lice. Look at the names on Beach's committee!

Well, it rejoices me that some one has the brain and nerve

to give them what was coming to them. Good for you!

I hope you often long for "my cool grey city of love." You will when the summer weather begins! I manage to keep busy, and am at an "advertising campaign" at present: the tract of redwoods above Joaquin Miller's old home belongs to my cousin, and is to go on the market. I'm some little advertiser, Rex Theodorus!

By the way, some of your cosmic gropings in "Hey Rub-a-Dub" have inspired me to write an essay that (so far) I call "Life."<sup>3</sup> It will shed light on some of the dark roads we are following. As soon as I've got it out as a pamphlet, I'll send you some copies.

I was out at our lily pond a few afternoons ago. The lilies are all out, as beautiful as ever, and I contemplate a new raid. Wish you and Yours could be along!

Thine for the  
Reform of God,

George Sterling

I'll enclose a few specimens of my last work.

June 27, 1924

Beloved Mastodon:

Don't drop dead: this doesn't *have* to be read.<sup>4</sup> It's only an attempt on my part to give you light in some of your intellectual gropings, to try to answer some of the questions you have put to the Darkness. I am having it printed as a pamphlet soon, and want to dedicate it to you, so, if you're afraid that it's not the stuff you care to be godfather for, you *may* have to glance over it. This is not quite an up-to-date copy: I've made some additions in improvement. But there's nothing in them you'd object to, if you can stand for my main thesis. The printer has my complete copy.

Of course you may not care for my altruistic ending; but I've conjured up such a cosmic nightmare that I thought it needed a little amelioration. I don't care to afflict my fellows with the full weight of my pessimism.

Do you recall two very good novelettes in "Smart Set," a year or so ago, called "Smooth" and "Growth," by a young man, a

a Salt Laker and San Franciscan, named Whit Burnett?<sup>5</sup> He has just given me a copy of a third one, the psychological study of a youth torn by vicious and idealistic longings. He calls it "Division." Do you think you could find time to give it the once over and let him have your counsel? He worships you, needless to say. But here I may be treading on forbidden ground.

How is Fair Helen, and when are you coming to "the cool grey city of love" for a permanent habitation?

My aloha to you both!

George

Feb. 13, 1926

Dear Titanosaurus:

Thanks, a million of them!<sup>6</sup> I knew you'd not fail me. And a commendation from you will mean so much. However, I expect no production -- am merely wishing that Macmillan's don't lose money on the book.

I've no critical reviews of "Lilith," for I brought it out myself, only 300 copies, and those to give to friends. I sent none east for review. There were reviews in two of the local papers, but I forgot to keep them.

As for "poetic and philosophic sources and theory for the same," I must admit I'm in a quandry for a reply. I have followed the main poetic (dramatic) tradition as to the form of the poem, but have put more sheer *beauty* (I hope) into it than has gone into other American dramatic poems, for the reason that I was after more than drama. I made the poem moon-haunted, as a symbol of the illusory quality of pleasure and pain as indicative of that strangest and most awful of human faculties, our ability to be happy when we know others are in agony. I can never forgive myself nor humanity for that.

As to the philosophy of the poem, which is purely an allegory of temptation, I've let reason and idealism fight it out, and though so keen a mind as yours can discern that Lilith has utterly the better of the argument (which is the crux of the poem), yet I have put into the mouth of Tancred the best that can be said for the optimist, and many readers will believe that he is right. I think that is the better way, as denoting the eternal balance between good and evil (pleasure and pain).

I think that the poem, in its modernity as to astronomical truth, and its conception of pleasure and pain as the two realities goes deeper in thought than other American dramatic poems, for it does not take life as a bad joke, for pain demands more pity than that. I know that there are folk who deny the reality of pain and pleasure, and of course certain yogis and other enthusiasts are able to escape, apparently, the effects of pain. But for the vast bulk of humanity, as it now stands, pain is indeed a reality that admits of no mystical quibbling, and the hypnotized person, told that he is in pain, *feels it*, regardless of its illusory cause. We can be sure only of our own sensations. All the rest is debatable, aside from, perhaps, mathematics.

Schopenhauer claims that *pain* is the only reality, and it is indeed the greatest one. Nevertheless, pleasure is more than the absence of pain, as witness the violence and individuality of the sex-ecstasy, for instance. I should say that absence of pain was contentment, rather than actual pleasure. The pendulum is then at the bottom of its arc, though on its way toward either pain or pleasure.

Of course the modern school of verse-writers will kick about my traditional form and spirit, my archaisms like *thee* and *thou*, but Robinson himself is nearly as old-fashioned in his last *Guinevere* drama, without the cosmic importance of a portion of my theme.

Powys,<sup>7</sup> in a lecture, praised "Lilith" to the skies, saying it would be read five hundred years from now! I am sore at him, however, for retaining a copy of the book I'd borrowed, after I'd already given him the \$6.00 edition that the Book Club of Cal. printed. I wrote to him explaining the case, and he didn't even reply to my letter. So I don't care to have him quoted in praise of the poem, though I want you to know what was, apparently, his high opinion of it.

Sinclair Lewis<sup>8</sup> is here now, and we've had a number of celebrations, as one might infer from this shaky hand-writing. We motor to Los Angeles next week, but he returns in July to see my grove-play. I hope you'll come out too.

Gratefully,

George Sterling

July 26th, 1926

My DEAR Theodore:

How true to your nature to write me so kind a letter!<sup>9</sup> It almost overwhelms me to realize that I mean as much as that to so great a man as you, and I am prouder of it than of any letter I ever received. Wish I had descendants to leave it to!

It embarrasses me to have to tell you that the hospital affair wasn't nearly serious enough to have evoked your fine letter, but I'm glad it happened, just because it did so evoke it. I had too much to drink for two or three days, and it resulted, as usual, in gastritis; so I went on my own volition to the near-by hospital, to be treated. Found myself o. k. the next morning, so dressed quietly and slipped out when no one was looking! I still owe them \$9.00. Which brings to mind your gift: I don't greatly need it, but it would be churlish or arrogant to send it back. So I'll use it, one of these days, to purchase a half-gallon of our California muscatel, to share with my fairest. We will drink many times to you and yours.

You are very often in my thoughts, as writer and friend, and I look ahead with great eagerness to your next novel, praying too (in my fashion) that the gods may give you health and will for many more of your so significant and important books.

You and Mencken are my sole inducements to a trip to N. Y. Next year I may make it, if all go well, and what a joy it would be to see you! Here are few bright minds, in this sex-mad city, and I have to waste most of my creative energy on 4th rate short-stories, published with a nom de plume.

Gratefully, affectionately,  
George

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<sup>1</sup>Letter of December 26, 1920, to Edward H. Smith, *Letters of Theodore Dreiser: A Selection*, ed. Robert H. Elias (Philadelphia, 1959), I, 332. The chief source for these notes is my doctoral dissertation, "The Letters of George Sterling" (Southern Illinois University, 1968). I have also made use of W. A. Swanberg's *Dreiser* (New York, 1965).

I wish to thank the Charles Patterson van Pelt Library of the University of Pennsylvania and Thor Liliencrantz, Sterling's

nephew and literary executor for permission to publish these letters.

<sup>2</sup>Rex Ellingwood Beach (1877 - 1949), the president of the highly conservative Authors' League of America from 1917 to 1921, was a miner and professional football player who had become highly successful as an author of adventure stories. His most famous work is probably *The Spoilers* (1906). Beach, who had fourteen of his novels and sixteen original scenarios made into movies, was one of the first American novelists to become rich from his film rights. The letter to which Sterling refers is a formal letter of April 26, 1923, inviting writers "to help in a definite plan to advance the artistic and cultural standards of motion pictures." Dreiser replied that the league would be making better use of its energies if it concentrated on guaranteeing American writers freedom from censorship at the hands of conservative groups (*Letters*, II, 408). Sterling had refused to join the organization in 1920 because he was disgusted by the calibre of its members.

<sup>3</sup>Sterling's "Life," which was entitled at different times "Pleasure and Pain" and "Implications of Infinity," expresses essentially the same philosophy implicit in his "The Testimony of the Suns" and *Lilith*. He argues that pleasure and pain are the only realities. Even the will to live is of secondary importance, because organisms act as they do primarily to obtain pleasure and avoid pain. Especially in early stages of evolution, the organisms are incapable of such a long-range goal as preserving their lives. Since pleasure and pain direct the activities of organisms, all evolution can be traced to these forces. All perception can also be traced to pleasure and pain, since all things are perceived as either pleasurable or painful. Pleasure and pain are the "good" and "evil" in the world, and are the only standards by which anything can be understood or judged.

Pain in life far outbalances pleasure. The individual organism survives only because it is capable of enjoying its own pleasures and ignoring the immeasurable pain around it. There is little hope that evolution will change this balance because, as old pains disappear, they are immediately replaced by new problems and desires which cause new pain. The nature of the universe also prevents any permanent progress, for each star, and the life of the planets around it, are destined to die. The process of evolution is then repeated on other planets circling new stars.

Dreiser's *Hey Rub-a-Dub-Dub* resembles "Life" in its agnosti-

cism and materialism, but it does not anticipate Sterling's theory of pleasure and pain.

<sup>4</sup>"Life."

<sup>5</sup>Whit Burnett, writer, editor, and anthologist, is probably best known for his work as editor of *Story*, which specializes in the work of young writers. At Sterling's repeated request, Dreiser tried to bring Burnett's work to the attention of Eastern publishers.

"Division" appeared in Edward J. O'Brien's *The Best Short Stories of 1935*.

<sup>6</sup>Dreiser had agreed to write an introduction to the 1926 edition of Sterling's dramatic poem, *Lilith*.

*Lilith*, a beautiful demon, dupes Tancred into betraying his family, his best friend, and his sweetheart. In the fourth act, she urges him to save himself from the rack by betraying his faith in a vaguely socialistic "progress." She argues that, because everything but pleasure and pain is illusion, the pains of the rack are more real than Tancred's ideals. Tancred replies that, even if she is right, he cannot forsake his ideals without forsaking his own humanity. He prophesies the eventual victory of the human race over its environment.

In his introduction, Dreiser praises *Lilith* as "richer in thought than any American dramatic poem with which I am familiar," and calls it "a compact of a noble and haunting sense of beauty." Although Sterling was grateful to Dreiser, he felt that Dreiser had not completely understood the poem (Letter to Carey McWilliams, May 12, 1926). Perhaps it was Dreiser's rather simplistic treatment of *Lilith* as a symbol of sexuality which occasioned Sterling's comment.

<sup>7</sup>John Cowper Powys.

<sup>8</sup>Lewis was befriended by Sterling in 1909, when the then-unknown novelist first visited Carmel.

<sup>9</sup>Dreiser had heard from Mencken that Sterling was ill, and sent five dollars with a promise to send him more when he could afford it.

Sterling was to commit suicide the following November, during the aftermath of a similar binge.

## Dreiser on An American Tragedy in Prague

*Editors' Note:* We have received the following letter, concerning the production of *An American Tragedy* in Prague, from Ruth Kennell. "I kept a carbon with Dreiser's signature which I plan to send to the archives," writes Miss Kennell. "This copy is typed from the carbon I made when I typed the copy I made for Stanislavsky. That carbon is on faded brown paper and has his initials on it. I have never made this letter public before."

February 8, 1927

Dear Mr. Kohl:

I certainly recall with pleasure the Bohemian dinner we attended in that most amusing of restaurants, and since leaving Prague, I have thought of you as perhaps the sanest and most sincerely artistic person that I met there.

It pleases me enormously that you are interested to do "An American Tragedy" in Prague, and because of your interest and the possibility that you may go further with the matter, I wish to advise you concerning some of the technical difficulties that were met with here in the first place, which, since the production of the play, have been overcome. Let me first say, however, that under special cover I am sending you a working script of the play as it is being done now, and I feel that if that is followed carefully and adequately interpreted by individuals suited to the parts, that the play can be a success in Prague.

One of the difficult scenes in the play is that in which Clyde hears the voice of his darker self. As this was first done here, there was no mask used at all, and the impulse to murder and the justification of the mood was not artistically established. In fact, the lines as written were not sufficiently dramatic or important to carry this crucial point. To obviate that, the mask, a plan of which I am herewith enclosing, was introduced. Technically, this paper explains itself, but the very sombre, arresting effect is achieved not only by this mask, a duplicate of which will be forwarded to you on request, but by the very necessary addition

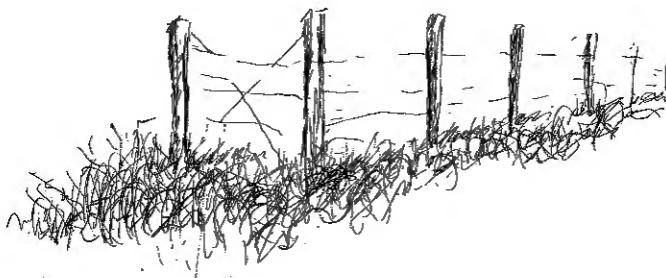
of a sombre, sonorous and moving voice speaking in a low, slow monotone. I emphasize this because it is most important. This scene, as it has been done here, is absolutely ineffective without it. Furthermore, the optical effect which is so important in creating the right impression in the minds of the audience depends upon the manner with which the lighting of the mask is handled. As it is operated here, the voice begins with the word 'Clyde' sonorously enunciated, and as it does so, the lights dim in and as the voice continues, the lights slowly come up until the mask is easily distinguishable from all parts of the house. At the conclusion of the voice, the lights slowly dim out, the cue for the lighting being marked in the script.

Another important scene in the play relates to the trial. The lighting of Clyde's face in this scene should be done so that it has a waxy pallor, yet sufficiently strong for the audience to detect the emotions to which the vehemence of the legal attack subject him. The lawyers in assuming the audience to be the jury in this same scene should address them as though they were really twelve men, and they were entering into intimate confidence with them.

As I told you before, I do not know the financial conditions which govern such production in Prague, but the usual terms will be satisfactory to me.

Sincerely,

T. D.



## Theodore Dreiser

*For over against grasping greed I place  
the endless patient risings at dawn of mothers . . .*

As weak and scrawny as a sickly lamb,  
He lived with his mother in Indiana  
In a cottage by the side of the road,  
Not far from the local slaughterhouse.  
She took in washing, stray dogs and cats  
And pregnant girls who had no place to stay.  
From the cottage, two or three times a week,  
He watched the one-eyed butcher Spilky  
Drive the dumbly plodding animals  
Up the dusty country road to die.  
He could hear pigs penned near the slaughterhouse  
Squeal in frenzy as the animals  
Approached, for they fed on the entrails.  
Later on he saw Chicago's stockyards  
And decided life was nothing more than  
Murder and lust. Denying his kinship  
With the doomed flock, he admired the wolf  
Prowling for victims under icy stars.  
Nothing could have been more anomalous.  
He was really a sheep in wolf's clothing  
Who grieved with the shepherd for the flock.  
But the age was one of enterprise,  
Not pity, and he ran with the pack  
For as long as he could. Well past sixty,  
He was still snarling at reporters that  
It was always survival of the fittest,  
In the U. S. A. or U. S. S. R.  
He told a communist to visit  
A slaughterhouse if he didn't believe it.  
"Sweet, tender, flawless universe, indeed!" he scoffed.  
His argument, like his hair, was wearing thin,  
And he was hopelessly inconsistent:  
In public he condemned the poor as unfit,  
But grieved for them tenderly in his art.  
And then quite suddenly, before he died,  
The long road behind him, he entered in  
To the peaceable kingdom. The prophets  
Were there, perhaps, together in truth;

His mother, too, singing, hanging clean sheets  
To dry in the sun; and his dear dead mutt  
Snap, tagging at his heels, wagging his tail,  
United in one last vision of light.

--Robert Forrey

## NEWS AND NOTES

Donald Pizer, whose "The Publications of Theodore Dreiser: A Checklist," appeared in *PROOF: A Yearbook of American Bibliographical and Textual Studies*, I (1971), 247-92, will probably bring out this checklist in revised form as a separate publication, and would like to receive corrections and additions to it. "Any hint or lead, not necessarily a definite item, would be appreciated," he writes. Address: Newcomb College, Tulane University, New Orleans, La. 70118 . . . . The first chapter of *Sister Carrie* is included in a section entitled "Finding the City" in *The City: American Experience*, an anthology edited by Alan Trachtenberg, Peter Neill and Peter C. Bunnell (Oxford Univ. Press, 1971) . . . . *The Sway of the Grand Saloon, A Social History of the North Atlantic*, by John Malcolm Brinnin (Delacorte, 1971), contains three passages from Dreiser's *A Traveller at Forty*: TD's comments on the *Mauretania*, on the sinking of the *Titanic*, and on the service rendered aboard the *Aquitania* . . . . In an interview with Joseph Epstein in the *New York Times Book Review* (9 May 1971, pp. 4 ff.), Saul Bellow stated that, of the generation of novelists before his own, he most admired Faulkner, with Hemingway next and Fitzgerald a poor third, but that, more than any of these, he admired the work of Dreiser. Epstein quotes Bellow as saying: "For all his alleged crudity, Dreiser, of all the American writers of this century, was most aware of the complexities of human experience, demonstrated the deepest human feeling and had the strongest sense of human destiny" . . . . John McAleer has suggested that plans for a Dreiser stamp be postponed until 1975 when an effort will be made to commemorate the 50th anniversary of *An American Tragedy* . . . . Dreiser's *Trilogy of Desire*, with an introduction by Philip L. Gerber was published by World in 1972; it costs \$15 . . . . In Luke Rhinehart's novel *The Dice Man* (Morrow, 1971), a Yale professor overcomes a writing block through dice therapy, and subsequently publishes "a particularly nonsensical article on Theodore Dreiser and the Lyrical Impulse."